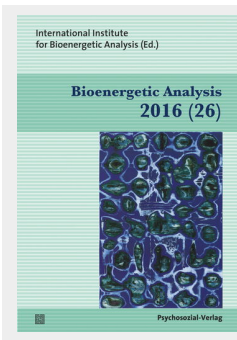


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The Alchemy of Ground



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Abstracts

English

The “Alchemy of Ground” is a personal essay about finding home in nature. Paleo-anthropologists tell us that the mineral structure of the earth and water of our childhood home, written into our bones, identifies our homeland. As one client demonstrates, while culturally we are independent and mobile, we hunger for our body’s familiar experience of homeland. More than minerals, the colors of the earth, the guardianship of the trees that think in slow time, the dominance of smell over our artificial sense of time – these draw our bodies back to a communication, deep rhythm and longing for a lost earth, that we split away from and forgot.

Key words: paleo-anthropologists, bones, alchemy, ground, homeland, tree, mineral

German

Die “Alchimie des Grundes” ist ein persönlicher Aufsatz über die Findung einer Heimat in der Natur. Von Paleo-Anthropologen erfahren wir, dass die mineralische Zusammensetzung der Erde und des Wassers der Orte unserer Kindheit unseren Knochen eingeschrieben sei und damit unsere Heimat definiere. An-

hand eines Fallbeispiels wird gezeigt, wie wir nach unserer körperlich vertrauten Heimerfahrung dürsten, während wir kulturell unabhängig und mobil sind. Mehr als die Mineralien, sind es die Farben der Erde, der Schutz der Bäume, die zeitverzögernd denken, die Dominanz unseres Geruchsinns gegenüber unserem artifiziellen Zeitempfinden – die unsere Körper zurück in eine Kommunikation, einen tiefen Rhythmus und eine Sehnsucht nach der verlorenen Erde ziehen, von der wir uns abgespalten und die wir vergessen haben.

French

“L’Alchimie de la Terre” est un essai personnel au sujet du sentiment de se sentir chez soi dans la nature. Les paleo-anthropologues nous apprennent que la structure minérale de la terre et de l’eau de notre enfance, est inscrite dans nos os, et que c’est elle qui détermine le sentiment d’être “chez soi”. Comme le démontre un client, alors que, au niveau culturel, nous sommes indépendants et “déplaçables”, nous avons un besoin viscéral de cette expérience corporelle d’être “chez soi”. En plus des minéraux, les couleurs de la terre, la présence protectrice des arbres qui pensent lentement, les odeurs, bien plus puissantes que notre artificiel découpage du temps, ramènent nos corps au contact du rythme de la profonde nostalgie de la terre perdue; sentiment dont nous nous sommes coupés pour l’oublier.

Spanish

El “Alquimia de la tierra” es un ensayo personal acerca de cómo encontrar el hogar en la naturaleza. Los paleo-antropólogos nos dicen que la estructura mineral de la tierra y el agua del hogar de nuestra infancia escrita en nuestros huesos, identifica a nuestra patria. Tal y como un cliente demuestra, aunque culturalmente somos independientes y móviles, estamos hambrientos por tener nuestra experiencia familiar de la patria en nuestro cuerpo. Más que los minerales, los colores de la tierra, la tutela de los árboles que piensan con lentitud, la dominación del olor sobre nuestro sentido artificial del tiempo nos devuelven a nuestros cuerpos a la comunicación, el ritmo profundo y anhelo de una tierra perdida de la que partimos y a la cual olvidamos.

Portuguese

A “Alquimia do Solo” é um ensaio pessoal sobre a descoberta do lar na natureza. Paleo-antropólogos reportam que a estrutura mineral da terra e da água de nossa

terra natal, inscrita em nossos ossos, identifica nossa terra. Como demonstra o caso de um cliente, embora sejamos culturalmente independentes e móveis, ansiamos por nossa experiência corporal familiar da terra natal. Mais do que os minerais, as cores da terra, a guarda das árvores que pensam em câmera lenta, a dominância do cheiro sobre nosso sentido artificial de tempo levam nosso corpo de volta à comunicação, ao ritmo profundo e ao anseio por uma terra perdida, que, em algum momento cortamos fora de nossas vidas e esquecemos.

Essay

Written into the mineral structure of our bones is the signature that locates our homeland. So paleo-anthropologists can determine in the bones they find whether the owner has been born, lived and died in the same place. I'm not sure whether with time the mineral structure of the earth and water of our emotional childhood home will ever be completely washed away by the waters of a new land. As a psychoanalyst, I find the body and the earth so often the forefront of my life and work.

A man told me he never felt at home anywhere. Where he currently lived was the best compromise having been uprooted every few years as a child by his desperate parents, continuously searching for work. He could not locate himself at the deepest levels in a safe place, an essential ground we all need. He spoke to me of his attachments being ripped away throughout childhood, his impotent rage, his invisibility, of emotions unaddressed, so we addressed them school by school, state by state, house by house as good analysts do.

When he was young, my client, Walt, became adept at introducing himself as the new kid to children who had grown up together, performing a rehearsed introduction at every new school, a most compelling first act, even though he, with tears, so desperately longed for a five act play as a child in one place, rather than, as it were, a life of broken attachments, living out of a bus.

His state of homelessness, amid the rock-solid stability of his long established adult life style in one location, continued to haunt him. An analysis could address the unmet emotional residue, but Walt remained a man without a locality, because the pain and failure to ground, to identify himself from somewhere, was visceral, a penetrating sensibility. Initial grounding exercises I'm sorry to say, did not miraculously solve his problem.

It was his body experience that needed to be addressed, the languages in which the body thinks. I told him that the mineral deposits in our bones located us, no matter what, just as certainly as we might track down our forebears through

DNA. But as I inquired about the earthy sensations of places, clearly he was a person of the North. He liked snow, ice skating, the smell of fresh water off of the lake, and of course the sound of loons and he remembered his adolescence in Northern Minnesota where some family remained. We located him just fine.

At last we were talking in the languages of the body, the powerful imprint of a particular kind of black, thick, edgy smells of a bog, of the taste of water and the smell of pine, the sight and feel of peeling white bark of birch trees, of fish and canoes. There were our footprints filling with water stepping out of a boat on a sloping shore. He never liked the south, the heat of Texas and New Mexico.

He just never liked it at all. It was never home there, not like the North.

The man came back another week, if not entirely cured for all time, at least transformed. He knew who he was, where he was from, and who his people were. The North represented a mythology written into his body by the land. It is no accident that throughout the ages the land has been considered the Mother and the Sky, the Father, these mythic parents that seemingly claim us too. What is it like to be brought up in Wyoming with what seems like all that sky? Our body's attachment needs to locate itself in the mother, our ground, because we have lost our place in a culture built on mindless relocations and the loss of a common ethic, community, and the loss of the sky and earth we love, a terrain for some, more certain than family.

Only 100,000 years earlier, we knew so much in the subtle memory and sensibility of the body, so certain and particular. We knew the names of hundreds of plants and trees. Certainly we knew the feel of the sandy soil on our feet as we ran down, 10 years old, on the path overgrown with grasses that bite to the meadows in places thick in mud with the water bringing everything to it. Similarly in our own time here, there was once, at 10 years old, so little to block out under the brilliant omnipotent assault of the sun that claimed us to a particular orb of time, and we, with so little to remember that was not just known.

During September of 2001 returning to Maine for a week from the settled-down homelessness of the West Coast to a summer cottage as remnant of adolescent summers and later visits, my heart thick with the edge of divorce, I felt, to my utter surprise, like I had come home. For so long, displaced, I had dully, as if in a coma, forgotten what I had lost. In Maine, looking out from my house, I saw the lobster boat I remembered being anchored there 50 years ago. Shattoe Island through some trees had not changed nor had the rocks I climbed on when I was so young, at 15. It was the shock of the body remembering, in a flood, what I could not have known as so precious, holding me in something timeless and safe.

I was grounded and unafraid, secure in myself, as if Spirit knew what I most

needed and held me there, having me drink full and then drink more for the dark return, to have a refuge within for a while, knowing that I was completely home. Even now those images are somatic script written in for good. After 4 days, I returned to the West coast through the Boston Airport on 9/9/01.

The verbal world has no way to bring us home. Its weapons are useless. We sit in a chair to know it. We have walked, sat and lay down upon this earth for a few million years, our species and our body having won its authority from that ancient lineage. The splitting we have endured being homeless in a world that throws us down, has its cure from the earth and sky if there is such a cure at all. Our local earth has left its location written into every cell, and our body knows when we return.

What memories can match the red earth and the green serpentine that gripped me in the trails near my grandmother's house in Hendersonville, North Carolina, up against the Smoky Mountains, or the feel of warm rain when my brother and I ran to the garage holding up big springy leaves as umbrellas. That was once a home too.

In Art school, I got interested in grinding my own paint. I asked my instructor about it. He told me machines could grind the pigment finer, but he admitted that he had ground his paint for a while. But he had concluded that artists who grind paint generally do not end up painting much.

I found out why a few years later in the cellar of a house my wife and I bought, an old farmhouse in New Jersey, near a school where I taught High School English. In the cellar with light on the marble slab, with dark yellow ochre in powder mixed with linseed oil, or Indian Red in its utter luminescence as I ground it with a pestle, I felt like painting was no longer necessary because no experience of color could be so intense ever again and certainly not in a picture, defused and weakened in shadow.

I was no longer involved with painting but an underlying alchemy intrinsic to earth that so deeply engages our pre-verbal wasteland of body time; so that I might have been paralyzed by the eyes of the unconscious, the eyes of the tiger caught suddenly in the otherwise black coal cellar of night. How can one make a picture after that? One takes space. One spoons the wild color into a metal tube and one seals the end with pliers and one leaves and climbs the stairs. One scrubs off the sticky oil from fingers with the color imbedded at the edge of nail and with the unshakeable smell like a cloud; so in an untimely fashion as if one had forgotten something unbearable, one changes back to normal. I am talking about the sensate, exposed body that we have found too dangerous to adhere to after the forgetfulness of our unprotected childhood.

One of my cats is teaching me about immediacy and the way the body thinks and the limitations of only being grounded in now. I was feeding my favorite wild cat who allows me to pet her, sometimes. I put some cat food on a paper plate and put it down outside on my deck where I always feed her. There are other empty paper plates there because I get tired always cleaning up. The cat followed me excitedly as I put the paper plate down on an older empty plate, my effort to consolidate.

An odd thing happened as she was about to eat. She became confused. She looked furtively about as if wary of attack, and then she backed away without eating. I forgot that late at night, I am visited by raccoons who clean up for me and this cat experienced the raccoons as present because of their fierce smell.

I took the plate off the raccoon's plate and the cat, still hesitant, returned to eat the food uneasily.

This cat was not able to sort out the raccoon of the past with the present moment. I don't blame the cat. The raccoon was absolutely present. Smell is pervasive so as to take possession of a range of time rather than occupy only a passing moment. Smell is like the earth for us that lingers, and collapses memories into one experience.

When I was a child growing up in Staten Island, New York, there was a field I crossed a ways from my house to visit a friend. It turned out returning from my visit, I would climb up into a beech tree with its skin dark and smooth like an elephant. I felt protected and held there. As I got older, I would sometimes walk there at night with the moon in its shifting stages dark or light, and climb up into this tree's branches as if visiting an old friend, an earthly grandparent. Years later, returning from college, I walked late at night to the field only to find it had been co-opted by tract homes. I found my beech tree trapped in the close right angle of a house. As quietly as I could, and every sound echoed, I climbed that tree defiantly and stayed there for a while, for a moment safe, heartbroken by inexorable time.

In Berkeley, in my back yard is a live oak sustained in life for a few hundred years by a nearby stream. My house was built in 1913, but the tree is so much older. My house represents a constructed thought that has held its own through the years with some decks added. The redwoods that border my property have a design that says "Grow tall and spread now."

In remarkable contrast the live oak has extended its limbs out relatively parallel to the ground for 30 or 40 feet held only by a thick double trunk. From one massive trunk another huge branch reaches up and out twenty feet at a 45-degree angle branching out 8 or 9 times into repeated branches, finally resorting

to leaves; and there are squirrels and birds and many limbs to accommodate them. I sit here once more attempting to draw the life of this bewildering tree so much older than me, so visually complex, so remarkably successful at life in the open. I am struck by how this tree thinks in its own slow time. And how fortunate I am to be in the company of my brilliant elders. My indoor/outdoor personal cat, barely two years old, sprawls calm and perfectly attuned on the deck at my feet.

What dominates me is this Live Oak, as incomprehensible as a small god. If I had a machine that could bring all our being into the same rhythmic breath, just a momentary gathering for a chat, there is nothing that I could learn more powerful than this tree holding ground thinking as only an old tree can think stretched out, breathing in the water so deep down in an earth that has its own pulse, an earth that has written its signature of some place else, its time and place in the cell structure of my bones. In my evolutionary being that I could not have reached but has found me, for a moment in an unconstructed space without intent, through what I assume is the extended grace of this remarkable tree and the earth that owns me, I feel, displaced as I am, not so much at home as included and for the moment, at peace.

A car stopped in my driveway, a day ago. A man with his aging mother in her late 80's and his wife, had returned to his childhood home to look at it from the outside, so I invited them in to walk around. They were profoundly grateful, having passed the house now and again not daring to bother the owner with their desire to walk on the same ground and look out the windows, or step onto the deck upstairs. Walking through the house, the man was possessed. This was my room. That was my brother's room. Look, there's the same bathroom, the same tile. Over there used to be a door to the kitchen. His mother said she always missed the views of the Bay. Where she lived now, there were no views.

In a powerful return like Odysseus to Ithaca, this man savored the native earth that infused his distinct composition and held the memories that grounded him in time. Outside, the man told me his father had planted the towering redwoods. But the Live Oak amazed him, in particular the great long branches reaching toward the house. They had not grown out that way 40 years ago. He and his brother had climbed that tree and swung on ropes from it and had a metal swing set where these branches now reached. He promised to send me pictures of the house of over forty years ago, when he was an adolescent. I have a picture of the house much earlier when it was only one of two houses built on this hill.

At least I study and teach in a branch of psychology that includes the evolutionary body in its rhythm and voice, because the body holds images that the facile mind cannot access. My mind thinks it is ready for anything, any bad news

certainly. My immediate time-driven mind is rather shocked when an image appears that from my point of view, should have showed up for me many years ago.

But my body thinks more like a tree. It takes forty years to grow a long impossible limb far out, sustained in what appears on the outside to be unsustainable, so much weight with so little direct support. Some of our illnesses take a lifetime of thought, acting through the limbs. And so our body of particular earth holds something with no urgency unless met in its own language and on its own irreducible terms.

About the Author

Dr. John Conger is a psychologist, a psychoanalyst, an IIBA faculty member and an Episcopal Priest. He is a core faculty member at Meridian University. He has a private practice in Kensington, Ca. He is the author of *Jung and Reich: the Body as Shadow*, and *The Body In Recovery: Somatic Psychotherapy and the Self*. He is presently writing a third book about Bioenergetics and the self.

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